

Bill's Talk

(Given at Opening Dinner - Al-Anon WSC, April 19, 1967)

I feel that Al-Anon is the most wonderful thing that has happened among us since AA started. And as each year passes, I say this with ever deepening conviction, based on the wonders that I have seen performed under God's Grace among you who have suffered so much at the hands of us drunks.

At the other Conference up the street, we're talking about "Sponsorship", and I would like to share a few thoughts on that subject with you in a little broader frame of reference -- that of communication. The healing that we see in AA and in Al-Anon is based on face-to-face communication by those in the kinship of suffering; when the identification is there, then the Grace of God is able to manifest itself, and the work of repair begins.

Now we AAs, as a society, have a defect that I don't see much of here. This statement is not made in any sense of blame. It is natural, considering what AAs have been that their announced purpose is sobriety; sobriety, first, last, and all the time. Without it we have nothing, and those near and dear to us next to nothing -- hence the enormous emphasis on sobriety. Preoccupation with the quest for survival from our malignant malady is the defect I was about to mention. It's all too easy for us drunks to believe that once we are sober we have got it made and to forget the other areas of living. We forget that sobriety is really but a beginning, a crucial one -- but a beginning. Indeed the 12 Steps suggest that we practice these principles in all our affairs. This is where the defect comes in -- "I'm sober, so dear lady -- dear employer -- dear community -- I have got it made", which so often carries the inference that after all "I was a hell of a good guy, anyway -- I just drank too much."

Now you people have not fallen into any such error. You have been addressing yourselves to a solution of your whole life problems, and, in particular, the family problem. This very wonderful aspect of Al-Anon you practice in a fullness that too many of us in AA know little about. After we drunks get sober, we do a little sponsorship, of course, around the home, but this sponsorship does not communicate very effectively.

We come home. "Ma, ain't you delighted we are sober?" She says, "Yes, yes, I hope it sticks." Well, maybe she doesn't show too much delight for she has reason to be skeptical; and then he says "Well, you want to get a load of this, Ma, so why don't you come down to the AA meeting?" So Ma goes down to the open meeting and she hears ghastly tales of drinking, with sobriety mentioned here and there, now and then, but mostly stories how we drunks "got it made". She knows that in the sense of practicing these principles in all our affairs, we just ain't got it made!! The kids are still restive, they're hurt, they're withdrawn -- the marriage doesn't seem to come off. She is keenly aware that something is the matter long before the alcoholic is. He just figures it's a question of getting sober, getting back to business, bringing home the bacon -- that is his part. So, while the dividend of sobriety is certainly enormous to you and to us, it is but a beginning.

There's one characteristic of AA that is also characteristic of Al-Anon -- sponsorship. The healing current of grace seems to be passed best between those who have identical experiences in suffering. You dear people have suffered alcoholism in one way, and the alcoholic has suffered it in another. You can't sense the common denominator of alcoholism that one drunk has with the next -- nor has the drunk really much idea of what it must be like to be in your shoes. But your art of healing is also based on the passage of grace between those of kindred experience. The beginning of your great task of repair starts with yourselves, just as it does

with us. You, however, are more aware of the amount of repair that needs to be done in respect to the whole life problem.

This repair is now going on apace world-wide, for in a decade and a half you have become a quarter of AA's size -- evidence indeed that you have been meeting this greatest need of all. You now present yourselves in the home as persons practicing these principles in all your affairs. Ever so often your renewal of sanity, if you please, (and I do not exaggerate) so impresses the drinker, that instead of saying, "Mama, come down to AA and get a piece of this," he looks at you and says, "I gotta have what you've got."

Another great and moving thing about this society is its ability not only to console and identify with the wife or the husband who still has a drinker at home; but you go further -- you are able, under God's Grace and by reason of this unique communication, to give such persons the gift of becoming whole -- whether the drunk drinks or doesn't drink.

And so the curious paradox -- the divine paradox -- comes into view, little by little. So often your example triggers communication again between you and your partner. You have ceased making demands upon him and hopefully he upon you, for we all know there is nothing so futile as a demanding partner. The giving of yourself, without demands for return, has a chance -- as a magnificent example -- of inspiring your partner to try to "practice these principles in all his or her affairs."

So your way of life is concerned with the whole problem. Our way ought to be and increasingly is concerned with the whole problem, thank God, due in many cases to your example, paradoxically learned from the teachings of AA.

Now then, you are assembled here to consider the task of establishing new communications with those who still suffer. Essentially, as in AA, your recovery process has to start with a face-to-face communication. So the problem is, how can you bring about the greatest opportunity for this face-to-face concept. In other words your task is to make communication ever wider, broader and deeper. The success of this Conference, and the high degree of responsibility that is shown as you grow in experience, is getting more and more evident to onlookers like me every year.

I know that I have not, on your behalf, been boasting of your accomplishments. I am simply saying that God has been very good to Al-Anon. (applause)

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